

# Violence, Politics and Catholicism in Ireland

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## Political violence and Irish Catholicism, 1798–1998

For a great deal of the period here surveyed the Catholic Church in Ireland lived under a government not always sympathetic to its existence and outlook. This was true for the whole country in the period 1801–1921, and then in Northern Ireland since the inception of that state and its Protestant hegemony. After the introduction of partition in the early 1920s the church existed in two jurisdictions. Independent Ireland was, for the most part, sycophantic in its deference to institutionalized Catholicism. This ensured Catholic support for the state even though independent Ireland had been born out of a violent revolutionary struggle which had, at best, dubious claims to be just according to Catholic moral theology.<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland by contrast harboured barely concealed hostility towards the Catholic Church. But even here the Northern Ireland state had to deal with Catholicism as a social reality that commanded the respect, affection and obedience of one third of the state's citizens.

For the most part, institutional Catholicism sought to inculcate in its adherents a respect for the structures of the state. This was true from an early stage, and despite lingering antipathy, even in the case of Protestant Northern Ireland. As early as 1926 Cardinal Patrick O'Donnell, archbishop of Armagh, could say of the desire of Irish nationalists for an Ireland free of British rule: 'All speculations belong to the past. The area of the Six Counties is now fixed as the area of Northern Ireland ... and we must work for the general good of the community.'<sup>2</sup> This should not come as a surprise. After all, throughout most of the nineteenth century the Irish hierarchy was in an analogous position – living under a government that ruled Ireland in the Protestant interest and which, for much of the century, sought to maintain Protestant privilege and ascendancy.<sup>3</sup> Bishop Patrick Leahy could thus complain that in the mid-1860s Catholic Ireland lived under a 'wicked anti-Catholic, anti-Irish, anti-everything dear to us government'.<sup>4</sup>

1 Walter McDonald, *Reminiscences of a Maynooth professor* (London, 1925), pp 396–7. See also his *Some ethical questions of peace and war: with special reference to Ireland* (repr. Dublin, 1998), passim. 2 Quoted in Peter Donnelly, 'Political identity in Northern Ireland: an issue for Catholic theology', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 86:343 (1997), 239. 3 Oliver MacDonagh, 'The politicization of Irish Catholic bishops, 1800–1850', *Historical Journal*, 18:1 (1975), 41. 4 Leahy to Tobias Kirby, quoted in Desmond Bowen, *Paul Cullen and the shaping of modern Irish Catholicism* (Dublin, 1983), p. 265.

## The Catholic Church, Ireland and the British empire

Much is made in writings on colonialism about the notion of mimicry in both colonial and post-colonial discourse.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the idea of identity formation was not a one-way street in the shaping of Britain's imperialist past and its relationship with its subject peoples. Some writers are struck by the concept of 'hybridity'<sup>2</sup> as a means of describing and analysing the relationship between the metropolitan centre and the colonial periphery. Ireland, while not conforming in all its characteristics to a definition of the colonial norm, nevertheless exhibits sufficient degrees of peripheral eccentricity to be considered an integral part of the colonial history of Britain.

One of the most interesting features of the hybrid idea as applied to Irish identity, given the quintessentially Protestant nature of British self-identification, is of course the role of Catholicism in the social, cultural and political landscape of Ireland. This is especially true in the period from the Act of Union of 1800 until the granting of partial independence to much of Ireland and the establishment of the Northern Ireland parliament in 1921. Ireland, in the course of the long nineteenth century, was a significant part of the new political reality born in 1801, but certain aspects of its government and culture made it completely distinct not only from the metropolitan norm but from other areas of the recently constructed United Kingdom.

Of all the features that made Ireland different, none was more important than Catholicism. Catholicism's dominance in Ireland and its function in shaping Irish culture and mores ensured that whatever hybrid identity emerged as the country played its role on the stage of British history in the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic faith would be essential to it. This was true, however, not only in Ireland itself, but also wherever in the world the Irish found themselves. Internally, within the United Kingdom, Irish migration to Britain utterly transformed the face of Catholicism, not only by increasing the number of Catholics but also

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse' in F. Cooper and A.L. Stoler (eds), *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley, 1997), pp 152–60. <sup>2</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (2nd ed., London, 2004), p. 56; B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (eds), *The post-colonial studies reader*, 2nd ed. (London, 2005), p. 183.

## God in the Famine

Peter Gray has sagaciously written of competing nineteenth-century views of the great Famine (1845–50) that:

A variety of factors informed the debate, among them Christian providentialism, political economy in its various stands, Irish and British nationalism, anti-Catholicism, and the land debate that had been raging since 1843.<sup>1</sup>

One of the striking features in surveying Famine literature is how time and again politicians and civil servants came to see that theories of political economy were meshed with ideas of God's providential interaction with the world. There is a certain sense in which the Famine represented not only a test of the political economy of the Union at that point in its history, but it also represented a test of faith, as individuals and governments struggled to make sense of what many saw as a 'visitation from heaven'.<sup>2</sup> There can be no doubt that the Famine did have quite a 'profound and permanent effect on the religious consciousness of the Irish people'.<sup>3</sup> It helped propel the 'devotional revolution' within Catholicism, and on the Protestant side it marked the beginning of the end of public discourse on the role of divine providence in the guidance of nations and public policy. To attribute suffering and death on such a scale to a merciful providence seemed completely rebarbative. Public debate recoiled thereafter from invoking the concept to explain human and natural events.

Before looking at the details of how churchmen and others saw 'the hand of God' in the great Famine it is perhaps worth briefly examining the theological ideas concerning providence as they were found in Protestant and Catholic thinking in the nineteenth century. On the Protestant side there had been in British theology, at least from the seventeenth century, a deep conviction that in circumstances of 'God's visitation' the people themselves were to blame, a view echoed by numerous individuals and organs of public opinion during and after the Famine.<sup>4</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> Peter Gray, *Famine, land and politics: British government and society, 1843–50* (Dublin, 1999), p. 95. <sup>2</sup> See Desmond Bowen, *Souperism: myth or reality? A study of Catholic and Protestant relations during the great Famine* (Cork, 1970), p. 119. <sup>3</sup> Robert Dunlop, 'Theological interpretations and implications' in Chris Morash and Richard Hayes (eds), *'Fearful realities': new perspectives on the Famine* (Dublin, 1996), p. 164. <sup>4</sup> Added to this

## Fenian terror and Catholicism in North America

The Irish Republican Brotherhood,<sup>1</sup> or as it was known in America the Fenian Brotherhood, was founded by James Stephens in Dublin in March 1858. Drawing some of its inspiration, and leadership, from the failed revolutionary attempt of a decade earlier, Fenianism gave expression to the militant and violent aspect of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism. Convinced as they were that Britain would never freely relinquish its interests in Ireland, the Fenians set about planning the overthrow of British administration. Unusually, perhaps, for a secret radical organization, the Fenians established a newspaper, the *Irish People*, in 1863, to propagate their revolutionary message. Some two years later, the government forcibly closed the newspaper and convicted the Dublin leaders of the organization of treason, except for Stephens who, in an instance of high drama, escaped from prison and continued briefly to provide flamboyant, if egotistical, leadership to the movement. After his ousting, a failed rising in 1867 brought the insurrectionist attempts of Fenianism to an abrupt end. The organization survived, however nebulously, and continued even in North America where it was all but absorbed into Clan na Gael. Its revolutionary ethos was, in the end, to provide the inspiration for the 1916 Dublin Rising.

In the early years of its existence, the organization's leaders were conscious of the fact that they had few resources with which to equip themselves for their struggle against Britain. A vast pool of financial and material help could, potentially, be exploited among Irish emigrants to North America and their descendants, who kept alive memories and traditions of hostility to British rule in the home country. Indeed, often the emigrant experience itself exacerbated and intensified incipient animosity towards Britain. The main role, then, of the organization in the United States and Canada was to finance Irish revolution. How successful the American Fenians were in providing the means of war in Ireland remains a matter of some dispute. The movement did, however, provide a focus

<sup>1</sup> Fenians could never quite agree on the exact name of the movement. Joseph Denieffe's history is entitled *A personal narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood* (New York, 1906), a name also favoured by Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in *Rossa's recollections, 1838-98* (New York, 1898), but not by John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish rebel* (New York, 1929), pp 18-19. For the most part, in referring to the revolutionary society, Fenians tended to call it simply 'the organization'.



## Cardinal Cullen's ultramontaniam

The political dimensions and power of Irish Catholicism in the nineteenth century have been examined time and again by historians.<sup>1</sup> The church's influence on Irish society as a specifically political institution and its relationship with the state has been given some attention.<sup>2</sup> Other aspects of its economic impact<sup>3</sup> and its role as a major factor of social cohesion have also been subjected to penetrating scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> Despite, however, the enormous amount of work that has been done on the devotional revolution,<sup>5</sup> we still await an Irish equivalent of Mary Heimann's *Catholic devotion in Victorian England*.<sup>6</sup> That is a great lacuna, because it is difficult truly to assess the hold that the nineteenth-century church had on the imagination of Irish Catholics and the motivating power of that imagination in Irish society, unless we have a proper grasp of the way in which Irish Catholics actually responded to the sentiments that touched them most deeply. Those sentiments were of course provided by the church's understanding of humanity's relationship to God as expressed in the church's devotional life – its public spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

In examining Paul Cullen's spirituality, it is important to stress that it was from this aspect of his life that all else flowed. One has to see that

1 From a bewildering array of material, the following is a small sample: Emmet Larkin, *The Roman Catholic Church and the emergence of the modern Irish political system, 1874–1878* (Washington, DC, 1996); Donal Kerr, *Peel, priests and politics* (Oxford, 1982); Steven R. Knowlton, *Popular politics and the Catholic Church: the rise and fall of the Independent Irish Party, 1850–1859* (New York, 1991); Ambrose Macaulay, *The Holy See, British policy and the plan of campaign in Ireland, 1885–93* (Dublin, 2002); Nigel Yeats, *The religious condition of Ireland, 1770–1850* (Oxford, 2006). 2 My own minor contribution to clarifying some of these issues can be found in some essays in Oliver P. Rafferty, *The Catholic Church and the Protestant state: nineteenth-century Irish realities* (Dublin, 2008). 3 See, for example, Emmet Larkin, *The historical dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (Washington, DC, 1984), pp 13–55; Liam Kennedy, 'The Roman Catholic Church and economic growth in nineteenth-century Ireland', *Economic and Social Review* (1978); Cormac Ó Gráda, *Catholic families weren't always bigger: religion, wealth and fertility in rural Ulster before 1911* (Dublin, 1984). 4 S.J. Connolly, *Priests and people in pre-famine Ireland, 1780–1845* (repr. Dublin, 2001); Emmet Larkin, *The pastoral role of the Roman Catholic Church in pre-famine Ireland* (Washington, DC, 2006). 5 Larkin famously started the debate rolling with 'The devotional revolution in Ireland', see Larkin, *The historical dimensions*, pp 57–89. 6 Mary Heimann, *Catholic devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1995). 7 Of course, work has been done on this area for the more informal aspects of Irish Catholic belief and practice, not only by Connolly, but see also Michael P. Carroll, *Irish pilgrimage: holy wells and popular Catholic devotion* (London, 1999).

## *Studies* in the shadow of modernism

Declan Kiberd has written that W.B. Yeats learnt from Oscar Wilde that art was not representative of its age, but is 'more often written against its prevailing spirit'.<sup>1</sup> In a certain sense this was also the programme that Pope Pius X (1903–14) had adopted with regard to the Catholic Church's role in the world and in particular with regard to developments in Roman Catholic theology in the early twentieth century. *Studies* was founded at a time of enormous upheaval in the political, cultural, social and theological spheres both at home and abroad. In particular, in that momentous year of 1912 Ireland was to endure a constitutional crisis of the first order which would condition for the future the facts of Irish, and British, political life, the consequences of which we continue to live with.

The foundation of the Jesuit journal *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* came at the end of a period in Irish life that had begun with the fall of Parnell and which many historians believe had created something of a vacuum in the political life of the country. There is a certain sense in which the foundation of the Gaelic League, building on the establishment at an earlier stage of the GAA and then the subsequent development of a literary renaissance spearhead by Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, did compensate for the political confusion and stalemate which resulted from Parnell's fall, his early death and the split in the Irish Parliamentary Party. The societal developments in Ireland in the years prior to 1912 must also be linked to a great flourishing of social, scientific and cultural developments elsewhere in Europe and the United States, all of which were marked by 'the spirit of the age', in the sense of being open to 'the modern'. The evolutionary change included the expansion of democracy, the demand for women's rights, the separation of church and state in such traditionally Catholic countries as France and Portugal, and nearer home the restriction in 1911 of the power of the House of Lords. This last facilitated as its corollary the ability of the Liberal government, dependent as it was on the Irish Parliamentary Party for its majority in parliament, to introduce a home rule bill for Ireland that would be guaranteed to be enacted into law.

So far as Catholicism was concerned a number of theologians, including the Irish-born George Tyrrell, agonized over what they regarded as the

<sup>1</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Irish classics* (London, 2001), p. 441.



## Catholic chaplains to the British forces in the First World War

The outbreak of war in 1914 represented a challenge to all the churches in the UK as they sought to respond at a pastoral level to the exigencies of total warfare. The problem was exacerbated when trying to provide spiritual support to soldiers and sailors whose principal task was to forward British war aims of complete victory over the central powers.

For its part the Catholic Church responded with vigour to what it perceived to be the spiritual needs of its members fighting for king and country by the appointment, for the first time in British history, of large numbers of priests to the forces as chaplains. Its ability to do so was circumscribed by a number of factors, however. The papacy – far from being silent as Hew Strachan claims<sup>1</sup> – tried, unsuccessfully, to plead for peace among the belligerents. This effort caused resentment among the Allies, made the work of chaplains in some instances more difficult and built upon a residual current of anti-Catholicism in British society which, although on the wane, had been part and parcel of British history since the Elizabethan settlement and which had been a central characteristic in the formation of British national identity.<sup>2</sup>

As the war progressed, and following spirited representation from Catholic authorities, the War Office conceded that Catholics, given the nature of the church's sacramental system, needed proportionately higher numbers of chaplains in order to meet Catholic requirements. The provision of such numbers was not, however, straightforward. A major issue that emerged was the reluctance of Irish priests to volunteer for active service as chaplains – a direct result of Ireland's political problems connected with home rule. This reluctance increased after the 1916 Rising and peaked in 1918, when the church joined with the party of revolution, Sinn Féin, to resist the extension of conscription (imposed on the rest of the UK in 1916) to Ireland.

These national political problems were further complicated by the dynamics of ecclesiastical politics. The archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Francis Bourne, was nominally in charge of the recruitment of chaplains and forwarding the names of volunteers to the War Office. His

<sup>1</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (Oxford, 2001), p. 1117. <sup>2</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (London, 1992), pp 44, 209, 344, 348–52.

## The Catholic Church in Ireland and the Second World War

Men are moved in these things by something far higher and holier than policy: by hatred. When men hung on in the darkest days of the Great War, suffering in their bodies or in their souls for those they loved, they were long past caring about details of diplomatic objects as motives for their refusal to surrender.<sup>1</sup>

Chesterton's views on the motivation for the doggedness displayed by participants in the First World War may not, on the face of it, seem too relevant for the Irish Catholic Church's attitude to the 1939–45 world conflagration. Nevertheless, hatred of, or lingering resentment at, the perceived injustices that Irish Catholics had over centuries endured at the hands of Protestant Britain was a factor in the attitude of some churchmen in their estimation of Ireland's role in the Second World War. That sense of grievance had been reinforced by partition in 1921. Indeed the bishops' objection to the proposal to introduce conscription in Northern Ireland in both 1939 and 1941 emphasized this sense of oppression. The earlier attempt had been dismissed by the bishops as 'an outrage on the national feeling and an aggression upon our national rights'.<sup>2</sup> Two years later their objection was predicted on the fact that:

Our people have already been cut off from one of the oldest nations in Europe and is being deprived of their fundamental rights as citizens in their own land. In such circumstances to compel them to fight for their oppressors would be likely to rouse them to indignation and resistance.

The bishops also made clear in their statement, obviously drawn up by Cardinal Joseph MacRory,<sup>3</sup> archbishop of Armagh, that:

<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The everlasting man* (London, 1925), p. 125. <sup>2</sup> Robert Fisk, *In time of war: Ireland, Ulster and the price of neutrality* (Dublin, 1985), p. 513. <sup>3</sup> Already in December 1939, MacRory made clear to the governor of Northern Ireland, the duke of Abercorn, that he had 'not a particle of sympathy with this war'. A sentiment rehearsed for the benefit of Archbishop Peter Amigo of Southwark to whom MacRory wrote 'I hated this war from the start and I hate it still'. AAS, MacRory to Amigo, 24 Sept. 1940. On

## The Catholic Church and the nationalist community in Northern Ireland since 1960

No one can doubt the importance of religion as an ingredient in the history of the conflict in Ireland. One explanation for this fact is that religion is a 'surrogate for the national identity'.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the politics of a divided society, within the Northern Ireland context, serves to keep religion alive. In their respective ways, Catholicism and Protestantism (in its various manifestations) have become symbols of ethnic conflict, and that conflict, even in the absence of direct sectarian violence, ensures that the symbols will continue to have meaning even when people no longer practice the faith that they ostensibly profess. From the Catholic perspective, identity is inextricably bound up with the relationship between the institutional church and the nationalist community.<sup>2</sup>

Although at a theoretical level we can deny the identification of Catholicism with nationalism,<sup>3</sup> for many Catholics in Northern Ireland, until at least fairly recently, it was perhaps true to say that their religion was also their political identity. The reasons for this were many and complex. One factor, however, was the tendency of institutional Catholicism to dominate the lives of its adherents in every aspect. Given the peculiar circumstances of the Northern Ireland state and its official and implicit hostility to Catholicism, the community could rarely differentiate its life into separate religious and political spheres,<sup>4</sup> despite at times sustained criticism in the community of the institutional church. Hence the spectacle of priestly involvement in political activity, even to the role individual priests played in selecting parliamentary candidates, long after such activity was deemed unsuitable in any other modern democracy.<sup>5</sup> With the advent of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, however, and more especially with the emergence of Provisional IRA violence in the 1970s, both the hierarchical church and the nationalist community began to

1 J.D. Brewer, 'Are there any Christians in Northern Ireland' in Anne Marie Gray et al. (eds), *Social attitudes in Northern Ireland: the eighth report* (London, 2002), p. 122. 2 John Daniel Cash, *Identity, ideology, and conflict: the structure of politics in Northern Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), passim. 3 Oliver P. Rafferty, *The church, the state, and the Fenian threat, 1861-75* (London, 1999), pp xii, xiv, 4, 21, 118. 4 Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The dynamics of conflict in Northern Ireland: power, conflict, and emancipation* (Cambridge, 1996), pp 67 and 74. 5 Desmond Wilson, *Democracy denied* (Cork, 1997), p. 105.

## Embedded memory and the churches in Ireland

What does it mean to talk of embedded memory? To embed is, according to the *Collins English dictionary*, 'to fix firmly and deeply in a surrounding solid mass'. The dictionary then gives various examples, among which is 'to fix or retain (a thought or idea) in the mind'. This rather implies, of course, a deliberate act on one's part. To embed then is something that I do consciously and deliberately, as for example when I commit to memory the ten times table. In Greek there are two words for memory, one *anamnesis*, which does have this sense of a deliberate act of recollection, and the other *mneme*, carrying with it the idea of unconscious memories that come unbidden to the surface of the mind. For memory to be embedded it must therefore be of the first type. On the other hand, historians of memory, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists are much more taken with the fact of the spontaneity of memory and, rather than memory being fixed or embedded, construct a paradigm which would indicate memory as something altogether more fluid.<sup>1</sup>

Memory of course gives me a sense of who I am, and preserves a sense of continuity over time, and although there is clearly a gap between the present and the past, memory functions as a bridge to what is no more. Memory therefore relates to the past and more particularly relates the past to the present, and as strange as it may seem, according to some philosophers, relates the present to the future. One could make a case for saying that in memory there is a fusion of the past with the present that will determine the shape of the future.<sup>2</sup> Indeed the capacity of memory, especially when it becomes a 'habit of mind' to shape present realities, is attested to time and again.<sup>3</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, for example, argued that present realities determine how we think of the past.<sup>4</sup> It has also been argued that even if the memories we preserve are not in fact recollections

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, 'Transforming memory' in Hodgkin and Radstone (eds), *Memory, history, nation: contested pasts* (New Brunswick, 2006), pp 23–5, who argue that not only is memory a process but that it is something constantly reworked, and changes as the needs and imperatives of people change. <sup>2</sup> At the very least memory can serve as a cautionary warning about the future. John Locke, *An essay concerning human understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddith (Oxford, 1979), p. 150, section 3. <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Augustine, *Confession*, E.T. by F.J. Sheed, 2nd ed., ed. by Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis, 2006), X: viii, 15, and Philip Gardner, *Hermeneutics, history and memory* (London, 2010), p. 100. <sup>4</sup> See Mary Warnock, *Memory* (London, 1987), p. 35.